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ABSTRACT

Topics of the three essays in this bulletin--which originally appeared in the February, 1963, issue of "College English" and the March and April, 1963, issues of the "English Journal"--are (1) how the materials of language and poetry and the perceptions of individual minds are employed in examining a poem; (2) procedures for reading and understanding the meanings (both literal and figurative) and the patterns of poetry together with an anlysis of the contemporary needs for poetry; and (3) the importance of understanding tone when interpreting literature, especially poetry. Authors of essays are W. K. Wimsatt, Jr., Josephine Miles, and Laurence Perrine. (JMC)

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What to Say About a Poem...

and other essays

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THE NATIONAL COUNCIL OF TEACHERS OF ENGLISH

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What to Say About a Poem*

W. K. Wimsatt, Jr.

At the outset what can we be sure of? Mainly that a poem says or means something, or ought to mean something (or ought to if we as teachers have any business with it—perhaps that is the safe minimum). The meaning of the poem may be quite obscure and difficult (rough, opaque and resistant to first glance), or it may be smooth and easy, perhaps deceptively smooth and easy, a nice surface and seemingly transparent. For either kind of poem, the simplest, but not the least important kind of observation we can make, the simplest question we can ask, is the kind which relates to the dictionary. What does a certain word or phrase mean? We are lucky enough, I am assuming, to have a poem which contains some archaic, technical, or esoteric expression, which the class, without previous research, will not understand. If we are even luckier, the word has another, a modern, an easy and plausible meaning, which conceals the more difficult meaning. (Ambiguity, double or simultaneous meaning, our grammar instructs us, is a normal situation in poems.) In any case, we can put our question in two stages: "Are there any difficulties or questions with this stanza?" "Well, in that case, Miss Proudfit, what does the word *braw* mean?" "What does *kirkward* mean?" "When six braw gentlemen kirkward shall carry ye." We are lucky, I say, not simply that we have a chance to teach the class something—to earn our salary in a clear and measurable way. But of course because we hereby succeed in turning the attention of the class to the poem, to the surface, and then through the surface. They may begin to suspect the whole of this surface. They may ask a few questions of their own.

The answers to questions of the kind just noticed lie in a clean, dictionary region of meaning. This kind of meaning is definitely, definably, and provably there—some of our pupils just did not happen to be aware of it. Let us call this *explicit* meaning. I believe it is important to give this kind of meaning a name and to keep it fixed. The act of expounding this meaning also needs a name. Let us call it *explanation—explanation* of the *explicit.*

Obviously, our talking about the poem will not go far at this level—not much farther than our translation of Caesar or Virgil in a Latin reading class.

And so we proceed, or most often we do, to another level of commentary on the poem—not necessarily second *in order* for every teacher or for every

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This essay is a reduced version of a paper read before The Eighth Yale Conference on the Teaching of English, at New Haven, April 14, 1962. An introductory section, here omitted, touched on the "grammar" of criticism, the categories of theme, diction, metaphor, symbol, meter, genre, person, tone, tension, wit, irony, and the like, which theoretical effort makes available to criticism. These, I argued, are an important part of critical equipment but not necessarily the immediate idiom of practical criticism and certainly not a dictionary of the trophies which criticism can expect to bring away from its exploration of actual poems. My essay aims to consider in a less technical way how we are using the materials of language and poetry, and how we are using our own minds, when we address ourselves to the examination of a given poem, to asking questions about it, to eliciting answers from our students. In its original form, the paper was fortified by a fairly extended explication of one short poem, William Blake's "London," in his Songs of Experience.

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poem, but at least early and fundamental, or in part so. This level of commentary may usefully be called *description* of a poem—not *explanation*, just *description*. There is no way of describing the weather report, except to repeat what it says—describing the weather. A poem, on the other hand, not only says something, but *is* something. "A poem," we know, "should not mean but be." And so the poem itself especially *invites* description.

The meter of a poem, for instance, is of a certain kind, with certain kinds of variations and certain relations to the syntax; one kind of word rhymes with another kind (*Aristotle* with *bottle*, in Byron; *Adam* with *madam*, in Yeats); some conspicuous repetition or refrain in a poem shows partial variations ("On the Echoing Green. . . . On the darkening Green." "Could frame thy fearful symmetry. . . . Dare frame thy fearful symmetry"). Some unusual word is repeated several times in a short poem, or a word appears in some curious position. Some image (or "symbol") or cluster of images recurs in a tragedy or is played against some other image or cluster. Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, for instance, may be described as a dramatic poem which concerns the murder of a father and a son's burden of exacting revenge. At the same time it is a work which exhibits a remarkable number and variety of images relating to the expressive arts and to the criticism of the arts—music, poetry, the theater. "That's an ill phrase, a vile phrase; 'beautified' is a vile phrase." "Speak the speech, I pray you . . . trippingly on the tongue." "Govern these ventages with your finger and thumb . . . it will discourse most eloquent music."

Description in the most direct sense moves inside the poem, accenting the parts and showing their relations. It may also, however, look outside the poem. *Internal* and *external* are complementary. The external includes all the kinds of history in which the poem has its setting. A specially important kind of history, for example, is the literary tradition itself. The small neat squared-off quatrains of Andrew Marvell's *Horatian Ode* upon Oliver Cromwell go in a very exact way with the title and with the main statement of the poem. Both in ostensible theme and in prosody the poem is a kind of echo of Horatian alcaics in honor of Caesar Augustus. The blank verse of Milton's *Paradise Lost* and the couplets of Dryden's translation of the *Aeneid* are both attempts to find an equivalent for, or a vehicle of reference to, the hexameters of Greek and Latin epic poetry. A poem in William Blake's *Songs of Innocence* is written in simple quatrains, four rising feet or three to a line, with perhaps alternate rhymes. These are something like the stanzas of a folk ballad, but they are more like something else. A more immediate antecedent both of Blake's metric and of his vocabulary of child-like piety, virtues and vices, hopes and fears, is the popular religious poetry of the eighteenth century, the hymns sung at the evangelical chapels, written for children by authors like Isaac Watts or Christopher Smart.

II

We can insist, then, on *description* of poems, both *internal* and *external*, as a moment of critical discourse which has its own identity and may be usefully recognized and defined. Let us hasten to add, however, that in making the effort to define this moment we are mainly concerned with setting up a platform for the accurate construction of something further.

The truth is that description of a poetic structure is never simply a report on appearances (as it might be, for instance, if the object were a painted wooden box). Description of a poetic structure is inevitably also an engage-

ment with meanings which inhere in that structure. It is a necessary first part of the engagement with certain kinds of meaning. (*Certain kinds*–in the long run we shall want to lay some emphasis on that qualification. But for the moment the point is that there *is* meaning.) In the critic's discourse "pure description" will always have a hard time taking the "place of sense."

Perhaps we shall feel guilty of stretching the meaning of the word *meaning* slightly, but unless we are willing to leave many kinds of intimation out of our account of poetry, we shall have to say, for example, that Byron meant that criticism had fallen on evil days–and that it didn't matter very much. "Longinus o'er a bottle, Or, Every Poet his *own* Aristotle." We shall have to say, surely we shall wish to say, that Milton in the opening of his *Paradise Lost* means, "This is the language and style of epic, the greatest kind of poetry; and this is the one theme that surpasses those of the greatest epics of antiquity." ("This"–in a sense–"is an epic to end all epics." As it did.) Alexander Pope in his *Epistle to Augustus* means, "This is a poem to the King of England which sounds curiously like the Epistle of Horace to the Emperor Augustus. Let anybody who cares or dares notice how curious it sounds." Shakespeare means that the action of *Hamlet* takes place on a stage, in a world, where relations between appearance and reality are manifold and some of them oddly warped.

Through description of poems, then, we move back to meaning–though scarcely to the same kind of meaning as that with which we were engaged in our initial and simple explanation of words. Through description, we arrive at a kind of meaning which ought to have its own special name. We can safely and usefully, I think, give it the simple name of the *implicit*. What we are doing with it had better too be given a special name. Perhaps *explication* is the best, though the harsher word *explicitation* may seem invited. The realms of the *explicit* and the *implicit* do not, of course, constitute sealed-off separate compartments. Still there will be some meanings which we can say are clearly explicit, and some which are clearly but implicit.

I believe that we ought to work to keep ourselves keenly aware of, and on occasion ought to make as clear as we can to our pupils, two things concerning the nature of *implicit* meaning. One of these is the strongly directive and selective power of such meaning–the power of the *pattern*, of the main formally controlling purpose in the well-written poem (in terms of Gestalt psychology, the principle of "closure"). It is this which is the altogether sufficient and compelling reason in many of our decisions about details of meaning which we proceed, during our discussion of the poem, to make quite explicit–though the dictionary cannot instruct us. In the third stanza of Marvell's *Garden*: "No white or red was ever seen/ So am'rous as this lovely green." How do we know that the words *white* and *red* refer to the complexions of the British ladies?–and not, for instance, to white and red roses? The word *am'rous* gives a clue. The whole implicit pattern of meaning in the poem proves it. In these lines of this poem the words can mean nothing else. In Marvell's *Ode on Cromwell*: ". . . now the *Irish* are asham'd to see themselves in one Year tam'd. . . . They can affirm his Praises best, And have, though overcome, confest How good he is, how just, And fit for highest Trust." How do we show that these words to not express simply a complacent English report, for the year 1650, on the ruthless efficiency of Cromwell in Ireland? Only by appealing to the delicately managed intimations of the whole poem. The cruder reading, which might be unavoidable in some other context, will here reveal (in the

interest of a supposedly stolid historical accuracy) a strange critical indifference to the extraordinary finesse of Marvell's poetic achievement. "Proud Maisie is in the wood, Walking so early. . . . 'Tell me, thou bonny bird, When shall I marry me?' 'When six braw gentlemen, Kirkward shall carry ye.'" How do we prove to our freshman class, that the word *proud* does not mean in the first place—does not necessarily mean at all—conceited, unlikable, nasty, unlovable, that Maisie does not suffer a fate more or less well deserved (withered and grown old as a spinster—an example of poetic justice)? Only, I think, by appealing to the whole contour and intent of this tiny but exquisitely complete poem.

"Who makes the bridal bed,
  Birdie, say truly?"—
"The gray-headed sexton
  Who delves the grave duly.
"The glow-worm o'er grave and stone
  Shall light thee steady.
The owl from the steeple sing,
  'Welcome, proud lady.'"

The second thing concerning *implicit* meaning which I think we ought to stress is exactly its character as *implicit*—and this in reaction against certain confused modes of talk which sometimes prevail. It was a hard fight for criticism, at one time not so long past, to gain recognition of the formal and implicit at all as a kind of meaning. But that fight being in part won, perhaps a careless habit developed of talking about all sorts and levels of meaning as if they all were meaning in the same direct and simple way. And this has brought anguished bursts of protest from more sober and literal scholars. The critic seems all too gracefully and readily to move beyond mere explanation. (Being a sophisticated man, he feels perhaps the need to do relatively little of this.) He soars or plunges into descriptions of the colors and structures of the poem, with immense involvements of meaning, manifold explicitations—yet all perhaps in one level tone of confident and precise insistence, which scarcely advertizes or even admits what is actually going on. The trouble with this kind of criticism is that it knows too much. Students, who of course know too little, will sometimes render back and magnify this kind of weakness in weird parodies, innocent sabotage. "I am overtired/Of the great harvest I myself desired," proclaims the man who lives on the farm with the orchard, the cellar bin, the drinking trough, and the woodchuck, in Robert Frost's *After Apple-Picking*. "This man," says the student in his homework paper, "is tired of life. He wants to go to sleep and die." This we mark with a red pencil. Then we set to work, somehow, in class, to retrieve the "symbolism." This monodrama of a tired applepicker, with the feel of the ladder rungs in his instep, bears nearly the same relation to the end of a country fair, the end of a victorious football season, of a long vacation, or of a full lifetime, as a doughnut bears to a Christmas wreath, a ferris wheel, or the rings of Saturn. *Nearly* the same relation, let us say. A poem is a kind of shape, a cunning and precise shape of words and human experience, which has something of the indeterminacy of a simpler physical shape, round or square, but which at the same time invites and justifies a very wide replication or reflection of itself in the field of our awareness.

Till the little ones, weary,
No more can be merry;
The sun does descend,
And our sports have an end.
Round the laps of their mothers
Many sisters and brothers,
Like birds in their nest,
Are ready for rest,
And sport no more seen
On the darkening Green.

What experience has any member of the class ever had, or what experiences can he think of or imagine, that are

parallel to or concentric to that of the apple-picker? of the Echoing Green? —yet the words of the poem do not *mean* these other experiences in the same way that they mean the apples, the ladder, the man, the sport, and the green. The kind of student interpretation which I have mentioned may be described as the fallacy of the literal feedback. Proud Maisie translated into conceited Maisie may be viewed as a miniature instance of the same. And this will illustrate the close relation between the two errors of implicit reading which I have just been trying to describe. The uncontrolled reading is very often the over-explicit reading.

III

Explanation, then—of the explicit and clearly ascertainable but perhaps obscure or disguised meaning of words; *description*—of the poem's structure and parts, its shape and colors, and its historical relations; *explication*—the turning of such description as far as possible into meaning. These I believe are the teacher-critic's staple commitments—which we may sum up, if we wish, in some such generic term as *elucidation* or *interpretation.* But is this all? Is there not another activity which has been going on in our minds, almost inevitably, all this while? The activity of *appreciation.* All this time, while reading the poem so carefully, have we not also been liking it or disliking it? Admiring it or despising it? Presumably we have. And presumably we ought now to ask ourselves this further question: Is there any connection between the things we have managed so far to say about the poem and the kind of response we experience toward it? Our liking it or our disliking it? Are we inclined to try to explain why we like the poem? Do we know how to do this? More precisely: Would a statement of our liking for the poem, an act of praise or appreciation, be something different from (even though perhaps dependent upon) the things we have already been saying? Or has the appreciation already been sufficiently implied or entailed by what we have been saying?

At the first level, that of simple dictionary *explanation,* very little, we will probably say, has been implied. And very little, we will most likely say, in many of our motions at the second level, the simply *descriptive.* It is not a merit in a poem, or surely not much of a merit, that it should contain any given vocabulary, say of striking or unusual words, or even that it should have metaphors, or that it should have meter or any certain kind of meter, or rhymes, as any of these entities may be purely conceived.

But that—as we have been seeing—is to put these matters of simple *explanation* and simple *description* more simply and more abstractly than they are really susceptible of being put. We pass imperceptibly and quickly beyond these matters. We are inevitably and soon caught up in the demands of *explication* —the realization of the vastly more rich and interesting implicit kinds of meaning. We are engaged with features of a poem which—given always other features too of the whole context—do tend to assert themselves as reasons for our pleasure in the poem and our admiration for it. We begin to talk about patterns of meaning; we encounter structures or forms which are radiant or resonant with meaning. Patterns and structures involve coherence (unity, coherence, and emphasis), and coherence is an aspect of truth and significance. I do not think that our evaluative intimations will often, if ever, advance to the firmness and completeness of a demonstration. Perhaps it is hardly conceivable that they should. But our discourse upon the poem will almost inevitably be charged with intimations of its value. It will be more difficult to keep out these intimations than to let them in.

Critics who have announced the most resolute programs of neutrality have found this out. Take care of the weight, the color, the shape of the poem, be fair to the explanation and description, the indisputable parts of the formal explication—the appreciation will be there, and it will be difficult to avoid having expressed it.

Explicatory criticism (or explicatory evaluation) is an account of a poem which exhibits the relation between its form and its meaning. Only poems which are worth something are susceptible of this kind of account. It is something like a definition of poetry to say that whereas rhetoric—in the sense of mere persuasion or sophistic—is a kind of discourse the power of which diminishes in proportion as the artifice of it is understood or seen through; poetry, on the other hand, is a kind of discourse the power of which—or the satisfaction which we derive from it—is actually increased by an increase in our understanding of the artifice. In poetry the artifice is art. This comes close I think to the center of the aesthetic fact.

IV

One of the attempts at a standard of poetic value most often reiterated in past ages has been the doctrinal—the explicitly didactic. The aim of poetry, says the ancient Roman poet, is double, both to give pleasure and to teach some useful doctrine. You might get by with only one or the other, but it is much sounder to do both. Or, the aim of poetry is to teach some doctrine—and to do this convincingly and persuasively, by *means* of vividness and pleasure—as in effect the Elizabethan courtier and the eighteenth-century essayist would say. But in what does the pleasure consist? Why is the discourse pleasurable? Well, the aim of poetry is really to please us by means of or through the act of teaching us. The pleasure is a dramatized *moral* pleasure. Thus in effect some theories of drama in France during the seventeenth century. Or, the pleasure of poetry is a pleasure simply of tender and morally good feelings. Thus in effect the philosophers of the age of reason in England and France. And at length the date 1790 and Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Judgment*: which asserts that the end or effect of art is not teaching certainly, and not, on the other hand, pleasure in anything like a simple sensuous way—rather it is something apart, a feeling, but precisely its own kind of feeling, the aesthetic. Art is autonomous—though related symbolically to the realm of moral values.

Between the time of Immanuel Kant and our own some complications in the purity of the aesthetic view have developed. Through the romantic period and after, the poetic mind advanced pretty steadily in its own autonomous way, toward a claim to be in itself the creator of higher values—to be perhaps the only creator. Today there is nothing that the literary theorist—at least in the British and American-speaking world—will be more eager to repudiate than any hint of moral or religious didacaticism, any least intimation that the poem is to measure its meaning or get its sanction from any kind of authority more abstract or more overtly legislative than itself. But on the other hand there has probably never been a generation of teachers of literature less willing to admit any lack of high seriousness, of implicit and embodied ethical content, even of normative vision in the object of their study. Despite our reiterated denials of didacticism, we live in an age, we help to make an age, of momentous claims for poetry—claims the most momentous conceivable, as they advance more and more under the sanction of an absolutely creative and autonomous visionary imagination. The visionary imagination perforce repudiates all but the tautological commitment to itself. And thus, especially when it assumes (as now it

begins to do) the form of what is called the "Tragic Vision" (not "The Vision of Tragedy"), it is the newest version of the *Everlasting No*. Vision *per se* is the vision of itself. "Tragic Vision" is the nearly identical vision of "Absurdity." (War-weariness and war-horror, the developing mind and studies of a generation that came out of the Second War and has been living in expectation of the third may go far to explain the phenomenon, but will not justify it.) Anti-doctrine is of course no less a didactic energy than doctrine itself. It is the reverse of doctrine. No more than doctrine itself, can it be located or even approached by a discussion of the relation between poetic form and poetic meaning. Anti-doctrine is actually asserted by the poems of several English romantic poets, and notably, it would appear, though it is difficult to be sure, by the "prophecies" of William Blake. The idea of it may be hence a part of these poems, though never their achieved result or expression. Any more than an acceptable statement of Christian doctrine is Milton's achieved expression in *Paradise Lost*, or a statement of Aristotelian ethics is the real business of Spenser's *Faerie Queene*. Today I believe no prizes are being given for even the best doctrinal interpretation of poems. (The homiletic or parabolic interpretation of Shakespeare, for example, has hard going with the reviewer.) On the other hand, if you are willing to take a part in the exploitation of the neuroses, the misgivings, the anxieties, the infidelities of the age—if you have talents for the attitudes of Titanism, the graces needed by an impresario of the nuptials of Heaven and Hell, you are likely to find yourself in some sense rewarded. It is my own earnest conviction, and I believe it important for the critic who understands this to assert it at every opportunity, that the reward will *not* consist in the achievement of a valid account of the relation between poetic form and poetic meaning.

Reading Poems*

Josephine Miles

PART 1: READING THE LETTERS

WHEN a student asked Robert Frost whether "After Apple-Picking" was not really about death, Mr. Frost replied, "Boy, I know how to spell *death* —d-e-a-t-h." He was speaking for the literal words and sounds in the poem itself: the words *ladder*, for example, and *tree* and *sleep;* the sounds of *essence* and *scent*, and the lines grouped by rhymes into dreaming, memory of picking and choosing, withdrawal, both animal and human. He was speaking for the literal poem.

Literal means *by the letter*, that is, by sounds in sequences, which by convention make for meanings. So language by letter is the literal material of poetry, as marble is the literal material of sculpture or bodily motion of dance. Whatever else the work of art does, it works solidly through its material. So poetry makes sentences—exclaiming, declaring, questioning, ordering—and it makes these from predicate and subject structures and references as most sentences are made. Then further, poetry emphasizes the sound-patterns in and across these sentences, so that the live measure of sound becomes a complement to the sense. The literalness of the poem then includes the characteristics of its sound pattern, a lilt, a complex interplay, as the letters lead us. Frost's "After Apple-Picking" is literally a poem talking about being done with apple-picking; the images that last, the sensations and the doubts, into the winter sleep. And it is literally a poem of irregular line length, so that the attenuated or coupled rhymes move with irregularity like the recurring memories:

lines 24-29

Language is more than by the letter; it implies as well as refers, because associations link concepts in various ways. For example, we have told so often the story of the Garden of Eden that the word *apple*, or object apple, may bring other parts of the story to our mind. And *applesauce* has developed a quite different association, as has *apple-polishing*, or *apple of his eye*. That is, different feelings as well as different objects and scenes are associated with the word. The very simplest sort of common association, that sort drawn out by word-association-

*This essay has been rewritten from articles originally appearing in the *English Journal* for March and April, 1963. Josephine Miles of the Department of English, University of California, Berkeley, is author of *Poems 1930-60* (Indiana University Press, 1960) and *The Ways of the Poem* (Prentice-Hall, 1961).

tests, relates a word to a coordinate or class, as *apple* to *plum* or *fruit.*

From these associations, these common groupings, are extended the implicative uses of language, which emphasize different bases for association: image and concept, as intensification of usage; symbol, as token; metaphor as cross-relation from category to category. So when we want to ask whether a poem implies more than what it says, we may ask really two questions: first, are the implications built into the poem, are they necessary to it as an entity, and second, even if they are not, may they be related by the reader's own contribution without distorting the poem; that is, if not implications, may they be read as inferences?

Frost is talking about real apples he has picked, and the scent of apples . . . stem end and blossom end, and the thoughts of the ones cherished in hand or sent to the cider-apple heap as of no worth. This context just does not allow for such associations as the common ones I have suggested—neither plum nor sauce nor Eden. But if one wants to accept the whole apple-picking and after it the tiredness of reaching and judging and the need for sleep, and to relate this whole complex to other human actions, choices, and rests, such inference seems possible, though not necessitated by implications. Both concepts, in words like *worth* and *trouble,* and images, in words like *barrel* and *apple,* work in their most literal relation and need no further implication. In contrast, Frost's "Road Not Taken" does make more of a road than a literal road, at the end:

last stanza of poem

Not the choice of a literal road, but the choice of what it stands for, the symbolic road, is what "has made all the difference" and so literally demands of the reader an extended association.

Metaphor

While image and concept intensify the literal, and symbol extends image to serve as token of inexpressible concept, metaphor is more complicated, in that it trades upon relations in categories. That is, it trades upon common, rather than uncommon, word-association patterns. So, as apple is associated with fruit, pumpkin may be with vegetable, and so, by their relative positions in their classes, we could call pumpkin the apple of vegetables—not a very enthralling metaphor, but one that makes the point clear by its very dullness. A better metaphor of the same proportional kind is King Richard the Lionhearted; Richard is to men as the lion to beasts, with the heart, the "courage," of a king. In Frost's "Design," "A snow-drop spider, a flower like froth," is such a cross-carrying, the white spider seen as a flower, in horrid effect, and the flower seen as a sort of spume or bubbly liquid, so that Frost must ask, "What had that flower to do with being white?" and answers, "What but design of darkness to appall?—If design govern in a thing so small." Even in a thing so small, the crossing of categories, as this metaphor reveals, can be fearful.

Dictionary entries show us our habits in the use of terms. We call a bird a bird and not a tree, a kind of bird a pigeon, not a robin, a kind of pigeon a dove, not a pouter, all by recognition of groups of traits and absences of traits. Then if the traits we stress are sensory, we may emphasize the imageable qualities, the *en-act-ment* which *im-ago* suggests, the sight and sound of the dove on the branch. Or by an extension of one of these traits, such as quiet sound, we

may emphasize the symbolic power of the dove to suggest, to symbolize, the concept peace. The word *sym-bolein*, meaning to put together, was used for the putting together of coins broken as tokens in transactions effected at a distance. Or, we may work without such objects or tokens, more directly with concepts, as metaphor does. Either in abstract terms like "Revenge is a kind of wild justice" or in concrete terms like "A dove is an a p p l e," we may carry-across (*meta-phor*) from one familiar category to another, to suggest their interrelation in terms of the context we are establishing. Metaphor like classification coordinates and subordinates by comparison and contrast. A dictionary makes simple formalizations of usage by listing for each term its common classification with coordinate synonyms and sometimes antonyms, thus placing it on a scale, or at a nexus of a number of scales. Meaning is a matter of degree, and allows us to speak of "most characteristic" or essential traits. So size may distinguish dove from pigeon; and beak, dove from hawk. "The huge dove has a sharp beak" would be either an aberrant statement or the statement of an aberrant condition; or, if its c o n t e x t established its relevance, it could be a metaphor, in which the transfer had a significance for the whole.

I have used detail in distinguishing these terms because it seems to me important that we not mix them up. A neat little sophomore came in the other day for advice on courses in English, and said cheerfully, "I do well in English because I can always write about the symbolism of anything." That's what I'm afraid of: that a fine literal surface may get dragged down into some perfectly unplumbable depth and there collapsed into nuance; or that, on the other hand, a fine implicative token of symbol may be read as an extendable metaphorical concept, or a concept probed for its irrelevant sensory characteristics.

The Straight Reading

I think that whatever the implications, the poem first needs a straight reading, a literal hearing, what its sound and its sense together have to say. Then, if a strangeness raises a question, if either a hint of implication or some s c h e m e, trope, or figure calls attention to a transference, stop and ask why, how, to what total effect. Poetry is not by definition committed to indirection; rather it is committed to the extra focus, the stronger direction and enforcement given it by its characterizing nature, its pattern of sound. There is an important difference, then, between the literal reading, which can be right or wrong, and a number of possible interpretations, which can be plausible or implausible; in making this distinction I am disagreeing with Laurence Perrine's essay in the *English Journal* for September 1961.

Because all poems are literal, and not all poems are more than literal, it's a poet's due to be read as he writes, and only then our due to read him in some further way if we feel like it. We can spell out d-e-a-t-h for Robert Frost's "Apple-Picking," but why should we pretend that Frost is doing the spelling? There is an exhilaration in the literal as well as in the figurative or symbolic. Shelley's "Ozymandias" begins:

> I met a traveller from an antique land
> Who said: "Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
> Stand in the desert . . ."

Later, a suggestion of their significance may follow, by explicit cross-carrying or by implicit symbolizing; but at the outset, their power is in their bare and factual existence. Especially literal, but in abstract idea rather than concrete image, is Wyatt's "Forget Not Yet"—

> Forget not yet the tried intent
> Of such a truth as I have meant: . . .

In contrast, Shakespeare's sonnet LX begins right off with a figure, a simile, losing little time for plain observation:

> Like as the waves make towards
> the pebbled shore,
> So do our minutes hasten to
> their end; . . .

And Donne's "A Hymn to Christ, At the Author's Last Going into Germany" is even more clearly and purposefully figurative:

> In what torn ship soever I embark,
> That ship shall be my emblem of
> thy ark;
> What sea soever swallow me,
> that flood
> Shall be to me an emblem of
> thy blood; . . .

We may see a contrast of degrees of literalness in two poems beginning with night: Arnold's "Dover Beach":

> The sea is calm tonight,
> The tide is full, the moon lies fair
> Upon the straits;—on the French
> coast the light
> Gleams and is gone; the cliffs of
> England stand,
> Glimmering and vast, out in the
> tranquil bay.

and Swinburne's "Sapphics":

> All the night sleep came not upon
> my eyelids,
> Shed not dew, nor shook nor
> unclosed a feather,
> Yet with lips shut close and with
> eyes of iron
> Stood and beheld me.

What these two poets make of these two poems depends much on the way they begin them, and on the open eyes, ears, hearts with which we read them. The spellings and the spells of poetry best come and blend together as they are received in their own separate identities. The facts and fictions least blurred are best realized.

PART 2: READING THE MEASURES

Poetry is measured, in a way that prose is not, by verse-line; and verse-line is measured, in English, by the close relation of more-stressed to less-stressed syllables. For prose, the relation is not so close; stress is rhythmic, recurrent, but not metered; one stress per sentence or clause is important, rather than one per phrase or word. "Once upon a time there was an old *her*mit, who lived at the edge of the *forest*." This sentence has a time-honored rhythm, which is not susceptible of closer measure by words or syllables. Even if we try the maximum of phrasal and lexical, or word, stresses in every place they may normally fall, "*Once* up*on* a *time there was* an *old her*mit who *lived* at the *edge* of the *for*est," we find that such emphasis does not suggest measure, because the relation of less to greater stress does not establish a regular pattern. Of the choices of possible pattern, the rising, "Once *up* on *a* time *there* was *an* old *her* mit," or the falling, "*Once* up *on* a *time* there *was* an *old* her *mit*," neither leads to a close relation between lexical and metrical stress. On the other hand, another famous sentence, "The *plow*man *home*ward *plods* his *wea*ry *way*," does lead to such a close relation. That is, the sentences are metrically measurable when the natural stress of words and phrases closely coincides with the formal pattern of alternating or near alternating stresses. Word and phrase structures in English make such correlation simple: sur*mise*, de*pend*, on *top*, in the *world*, is *great;* or, *fol*low, *tell* me, *hon*or, *un*der, *ab*solute, *for*tunate; then in combination they lead to complexities, of which a common example is word-division as in, "He is

lost; will he *fol* low his *star?*" The greater the complexity, the greater the pull and tug between lexical pattern and the scansion which measures it, so that the measuring stress may fall in some odd places, such as a *to* in "He *has*tened *to* the *top,*" but not so odd as to be distortive, as the prose passage's her*mit* would be. So the word has great power, and the pattern does also. In the line, "*Black*birds *war*ble *joy*ful*ly*," the syllable -birds is reduced by parallelism to the power of the -ble in *war*ble. Even drawing out its length, *black* bi-i-rds, would not strengthen it, because duration does not provide a significant or phonemic contrast in English. But a different pattern might tell us that these were black *birds,* not *black*birds: for example, "The *bold* black *birds* still *sing,*" or even "Black *birds* are *not* so *si*lent *as* black *trees,*" in which the possible alternative of a reversed first pair is countered by the parallelism in meaning: Black *birds* . . . black *trees.*

For poetry then we have the play of lexical stress upon and around the basic beat of metrical stress, and the reader may hear in his mind the relation of the two. When he reads aloud, he must decide which to emphasize, the meter's beat, or the meaning's beat, without losing the one he subordinates. Some will read, "The *plow* man *home* ward *plods* his *wea* ry *way*"; others, commonsensically, "The plowman homeward *plods* his weary *way*." But the important fact underlying the choice of emphasis in performance is the separate identity of the two frames in relation to each other; they are not to be reduced to one, because they are set up by the coinciding of two separate expectations, that of rhythmic or irregular recurrence and that of metric or regular recurrence.

Different poets make different uses of this coinciding. Some make it as close as possible, emphasizing the exact fit of meaning and measure. Others maintain the fit in order at times to break it with strong effect, to provide a balance of ambiguity. And others underplay the fit so that discrepancy just loosely happens, without particular significance. In the following examples of all three of these possibilities, close, alternative, and free fit, I italicize the regular metrical stress, leaving the reader to supply the stress of meaning.

Three Effects

In many poems there is an effect of inevitable close correspondence in sound and sense. Even the few stresses on light meanings like connectives *at* and *to* do not run alien to the meaning. Yvor Winters and his students, in our day for example, have been much concerned with such effect of the right accentual place for the right meaning, with a kind of moral as well as formal force. And many Elizabethans, followed by such eighteenth century poets as Gray and Collins, sought this rightness. We have heard it obviously in "The pl*ow*man *home*ward pl*o*ds his *wea*ry *wa*y, subtly in Collins' "Evening," and now expertly in poems like Winters' "By the Road to the Air-Base" ending

lines 13-16

The only discrepancy here is at *on,* and note how slight it is. No other word demands the stress which *on* receives from the regularity of meter; rather, the weighted *on* gives importance to the whole phrase. It is characteristic of such controlled poetry that its few discrepancies call attention to phrasal structures.

But, secondly, work of such measured inevitability may yet make alternative use, in the metaphysical tradition of Donne, of the discrepancies it develops. Marvell's "The Garden" begins:

> How *vain*ly *men* them*selves* a*maze,*
> To *win* the *palm,* the *oak* or *bays,*
> And *their* in*ces*sant *labours see*
> Crown'd *from* some *sin*gle *herb* or *tree,*

Notice how neatly, with what apparent pleasure, the stresses of sound and sense coincide: How *vain*ly *men* them*selves* a*maze*. Meter and idea agree on what is important. In the four lines, only one exception appears: "Crown'd *from* some *sin*gle *herb* or *tree*," in conflict with a more meaningful "*Crown'd* from some *sin*gle *herb* or tree." Marvell likes the effect of building his lines from the blocks provided by the structure of language. In word or phrase, his units are accepted whole: most simply, in them*selves*, a*maze*, to *win*, the *palm*, a little more complexly in how *vain*, by *men*, some *sin*gle her*b*, where the basic unit of measure cuts across a word, but still fits its second part into a natural place. With really long words this fit takes some doing, as in Shakespeare's, The *mul*-titu*di*-nous *seas* in*car* nadine. In such company, the fit can be part of the pleasure, and the small variations can carry their own small relevant effects. For example, a few lines later, Marvell allows,

> No white nor red was *ever* seen
> *So am*orous as this lovely green.
> (or) So *am*orous *as* this lovely green.

The first makes a ripple of unimportant syllables c o m e together in a suitable breathless way after the intensive *so*; the second makes the comparison itself important in *as*. Whichever the reader reads, he can keep both in mind to good effect for the meaning. This is the useful sort of ambiguity of which William Empson has written in *Seven Kinds of Ambiguity*, though his emphasis there is on meaning rather than on sound.

See how well such alternatives work for Dryden also, at the beginning of *Mac Flecknoe*:

> All human *things* are *subject to*
> de*cay*,
> And *when* Fate *sum*mons *mo*narchs
> *must* o*bey*.
> This Flecknoe found, who, like
> Augustus, young
> Was called to Empire and had
> governed long;
> In *prose* and *verse* was *owned*,
> with*out* dis*pute*
> Through all the realms of *Non*sense,
> *ab*so*lute*.

The accented linking in the phrasing "Fate *sum* mons *Mon* archs *must*" makes the summons all the stronger, and the regularity of the "In prose and verse" line makes the irregularity of the next, the of *Non* sense, *ab* sol*ute*, with its linking across a pause and a comma, the more forceful.

> Shad*well* al*one*, of *all* my *sons*, is *he*
> Who st*and*s confir*med* in *full*
> stup*idity*.
> The *rest* to *some* faint m*ean*ing
> m*ake* pret*ence*,
> But *Sha*dwell *never de*viates *into*
> *sense*.

The first accent of Shad*well* is dubious, so that the second *Shad*well is the more downright, like the two stresses in stu *pid* i *ty*, and the balanced stresses on *some* and *nev*-er.

Pope too:

> Slight *is* the *sub*ject, *but* not *so*
> the *pr*aise,
> If *She* insp*ire*, and *He* appr*ove*
> my l*ays*.
> ...In t*asks* so b*old*, can l*ittle* m*en*
> eng*age*,
> And *in* soft b*osoms*, dw*ells* such
> m*ighty* R*age*?

Donne is much like Pope in crossing caesuras cleverly, and in accenting his own meanings:

> There I should see a sun, by
> rising set,
> And by that setting, endless
> day beget;
> But th*at* Christ *on* this cr*oss* did
> r*ise* and f*all*,
> Sin h*ad* et*ernally* be*night*ed *all*.

Christ and *sin* here, like *Fate* in Dryden's lines, are suspended between two normally stressed syllables, so that there is

a sort of hovering of choice over these important words.

Spenser's is a third, a less correlated kind. In the *Epithalamion,* meter does not play across meaning:

> Yet learnéd sisters, *which* have oftentimes
> Been to me aiding, *oth*ers to adorn,
> Whom ye thought worthy *of* your graceful rhymes,
> That even the greatest *did* not greatly scorn
> To hear their names sung *in* your simple lays,
> But joyed *in* their praise.

Here is simple pattern of stress after pause, which emphasizes minor meanings not for the meaning's sake, but for the pattern's sake, even doubling it in many of the large refrain lines. Milton wrote similarly in "Lycidas," and later, as in Keats, we find an extension of the freedom: The last lines of Keats' "Elgin Marbles" read:

> So *do* these *wo*nders *a* most *dizzy pa*in,
> That *mi*ngles *Gre*cian *gra*ndeur *wi*th the r*u*de
> Wast*ing* of o*ld* Time—*with* a b*i*llowy *ma*in—
> A s*un*—a *sha*dow *of* a *ma*gnit*ude*.

The measured reading here is not a real alternative; it is just bad. No possible variety of thought or nuance is brought out by this regularity; so it is subordinated to the irregularity which is provided by the sense and which is indeed beautiful: a *sun*—a *sha*dow of a *ma*gnitude: each stress followed by its lengthening shadow, in the dash, the prepositional phrase, and the length of the final word. Now Keats is doing even more than Spenser and Milton to subdue the structure to the substance. And note Arnold's lines of substance in "Dover Beach" in contrast to more correlated Swinburnian lines.

Modern Verse

Modern free verse extends the possibilities of this Spenserian and Miltonian measure which does not foster ambiguity in its freedoms. Henley's "London Voluntaries," for example:

lines 1-5

As in "Dover Beach" and Keats' sonnet, regularity falls apart! This is true too of Whitman's verse, and even of H. D.'s:

> The l*i*ght p*a*sses

lines 1-10

Such regularization of the stresses in this cadence to any two in a line, though it is possible, does no good to the poem. The essential is the free play of reference and sound, not to be related either correlatively or ambiguously to any steady measure. Instead of setting sentence against meter, free verse sets phrase against line, achieving its own sort of discrepancy by line breaks which serve to counter phrases. The line "To the *end* of the *town*, the *world came* and *went*," may become

> *To*
> the end of the town, the world
> came and *went*

or,

> To the end of the town, the *world*
> *came*
> and *went*

or whatever, the line-ends providing stresses where the natural phrasing would not.

Not only this but the other uses of stress I have illustrated are more important to poetry in our day than syllable count, which aims to ignore stress. The light little ripples of extra syllables, so liked by nineteenth century poets after Coleridge's encouragement in his preface to *Christabel*, have become stronger in their number and power of irregularity; but still as a whole our verse is a stressed-verse, concordant, ambiguous, or freely cadenced, as we may wish. In the past century, in the work of Blake and Yeats, we may see wonderfully complex developments of the ambiguous use. In Blake's "The Tiger," for example, the shift from falling to rising pattern yet retains the expectation of falling, so that "Tiger" in the first line will be paralleled by "*could* frame," in the last, against the lexical and phrasal importance of *frame* and *fear*.

*Ti*ger, *ti*ger, *burn*ing *bright*
In the *for*ests *of* the *night*,
What im*mor*tal *hand* or *eye*
Could frame *thy* fear*ful* sym*me*try?

Here again is the hovering ambiguity of combination we have seen in the earlier colloquial poets, much heightened. Similarly in the third stanza, and throughout, the lines that could well be read iambically are heightened by the metric pressure toward trochaic so that we come effectively to the final *Dare* frame *thy* fear *ful* sym*met*ry?

Yeats' usage is more complex still because he adds stress in a way which reverses expectation. In "Her Praise,"

Though *sh*e had y*oun*g men's pr*ai*se
and *old* men's b*lame*,
A*mon*g the p*oor* both *old* and
*you*ng gave her pr*aise*.

or "Self and Soul":

When *such* as *I* cast *out* rem*orse*
So gr*eat* a sw*eet*ness fl*ows*
into the br*east*
^ *We* must l*au*gh and *we* must s*ing*,
^ *We* are bl*est* by *ev*erythi*ng*,
*Ev*erythi*ng* we l*ook* up*on* is bl*est*.

Here even the number of beats is held in suspension. The pattern is iambic, the beat either four or five, so we feel either that some initial syllables have been withheld; or that it is possible in some lines to suppress one beat rather than add initially. Thus, possibly,

So gr*eat* a *sweet*ness fl*ows* into
the br*east*

and:

*Ev*ery*thing* we l*ook* upon is bl*est*.

This power of alternatives makes Yeats a marvel to me. For others, other powers of sound are more valuable: the containment of certain classicists; the rising-above-it-all of the poets of cadence.* At any rate, in the small breaks in poetic pattern we may discern the philosopher behind the poet. For him, discrepancy may be minimal and of minor significance; or it may be maximal and irrelevant; or it may be moderate and important. So we may discern different kinds of integrations into wholes, when we read literally both the sound and the sense.

*I am indebted to lively recent discussions of metrics by Robert Beloof and Seymour Chatman in the *Kenyon Review*, W. K. Wimsatt and M. Beardsley in *PMLA*, Martin Halpern in *PMLA*; and have made my own modifications of their theories.

PART III: READING THE NEED

THE GENERAL impression is that in America and England today there are almost infinite numbers of minor poets writing minor works and a few major poets writing major works, and almost nobody reading any of them.

Certainly a number of facts bear out this assumption. In a country of millions, a reputable poet does well to sell 500 copies of a book, and these mostly to libraries. Books of poems rarely appear on bestseller lists, and when they do they are of not nearly so high a quality as most of the fiction appearing there.

We seem to have an anomalous situation—thousands of amateurs but few professionals; no real profession of poetry because no need for the profession. Thousands of corner-lot baseball players or dress designers or sopranos or cooks or teachers may go along happily unsung because they are after all part of professions through which some of them do rise to the top, and for which they can see, at least at the top, a need and demand. But who could ever dare to call himself a poet in the same way? I have a friend who has so arranged his life that he can devote almost all of it to poetry. In order to support his family he is a P G & E meter reader—but he does this reading, he says, in a sort of somnambulistic state, and is able to save energy for a good solid eight-hour night of writing. He is proud of being a poet with a capital P. Yet as he was flying east, recently, and found himself in a group of men all introducing themselves —"I'm with Caterpillar Tractor," "I'm with First National Bank in Duluth"— this friend of mine found himself saying instinctively, not, as he had always boasted, "Well, gentlemen, I'm a Poet" —but rather, "I'm with P G & E."

Profession of the Arts

What are the professions of which one can be proud because they fulfill both an inner and an outer need? Medicine, law, architecture, business, engineering, teaching, agriculture, the arts? Why do the arts seem to us less professional, more amateur, than the others? Not merely because there is less money in them, and maybe more love, and not merely because there are fewer men at the top—only a few composers, dancers, painters, poets, even novelists of renown—but because the artists have taken less responsibility to profess, to aid, to minister. That is, they have taken less public responsibility than the other professions. To profess means to provide, to carry your knowledge to people; and artists, though they may do so as teachers, do so much less as artists.

Why? Two or three interesting reasons have been suggested. One is that all arts are predominantly self-expression, and that the artist cannot be responsible to his own soul and to the public at the same time. Indeed, I was surprised to find this view still so strong that in a graduate seminar in theory of poetry at the University of California last year, every student held to it. But self-expression is part of a theory of life, and not merely of the arts. You may have ridden with people who drive cars self-expressively, for example, or roomed with people who dress self-expressively. There are clearly practical limits to this approach.

Another idea is that the artist is responsible to the public, but at an advanced frontier, so that the public catches up to him only about fifty years later. Henri Peyre of Columbia has written a book demonstrating this point —that even the best critics take a half-century to catch up. But may not this lag occur in all the best professions? Some of the best Supreme Court decisions are those which try to foresee the future rather than to reappraise the past. Some of the best medical discoveries anticipate rather than follow the pathologies with which they are concerned. It is a great power of the arts that they so closely relate both past and future to the present, both source and goal to the form of the work.

A third idea explaining the minor social role of the arts is their place in the Puritan tradition of England and

America, the Hebraic, anti-Hellenic dislike of aesthetic forms and of graven images. The men of America supposedly leave the arts to the ladies—and aesthetics, though a natural parallel to ethics and science, as the beautiful is to the good and true, is a word and concept used gingerly by many people. But these are the so-called practical people, usually not professional at all, because they are not interested in theory or in possibility or even in history, but in the present to the exclusion of all these. It is such practical people, supposedly characteristic of America, who supposedly feel that direct messages never gain by indirection, that content is never enforced by form. But few are really so practical—or impractical!—as this. Everyone naturally uses form in some way—in sports, for example, or in the order of foods served for dinner, or in the furnishings of a house, or in the conventions of dress, or the shape of cars—and the men are clearly as strong in the use of it as the women, so I think this argument for Puritan nonart in America has been much overdone. After all, the Puritans were not opposed to *all* arts, but rather to the ones they considered artificial and unnatural. They didn't approve of stained glass windows as representations of deity, but they did approve of gardens, of handsome buildings, of soaring music. And they wrote some of England's greatest poetry.

I do not hold then with any of these three explanations of why there is not now a greater unity of supply and demand in the profession of the arts. Neither Puritan anti-art, nor aesthetic art-for-art's sake, nor expressionist art for self's sake seems to explain more than the edges of the problem. All provide merely petty limitations. More important, I think, is that all frontiers of life are not carried forward at the same speed, and that artists in the mid-twentieth century have not yet learned how to profess the meanings of the century. That is, they are still reconnoitering its fragmented past, with Eliot, Picasso, Stravinsky, because they have not yet a vision of its future. In art for art's sake and for self's sake they have had a chance to consolidate their skills, to think of new forms for old materials. The sheer force of the new materials of human learning they have not yet been able to direct.

Supply and Demand

This is why I would suggest, counter to obvious evidence, that in modern poetry the demand is far in excess of the supply. We need from modern poetry what we are not yet getting from it—a profession of the new meanings to be found in our new lives. When I mention the sorts of meanings I mean, you will laugh, because you will think them unpoetic—But that is just the trouble—they shouldn't be—And you will think them inhuman—Yet always, significantly, humans are involved in them. What can be seen and felt on a freeway, for example? How do computing machines reflect thinking? How do we enthrall ourselves about the moon and Mars? These are not the nonpoetry but the potential poetry of life, and we need them.

Further, we need them not merely on the white pages of expensive books but in all the places where language can have significant effect. The potential, the latent demands upon poetry are immeasurable—by television, for example, and by advertising, and by political oratory, and by church services, and by radio commentators, and by peace missions to the Congo. I don't mean jingles. And I don't mean a pious use of Shakespeare's sonnets. I mean rather the verbal expression of the meanings of this world by poets who have grown up in it and perceive or guess, warn or challenge, where it is going. I mean poetry functioning in every possible way, to shape, to move.

If we look back at our history we may see that such emphasis on individual chal-

lenge has not always prevailed, either positively for heroes or negatively for villains. For example, in the first great stage of the history of our poetry, the Renaissance, the poetry was poetry of people in the social order, of kings, lords, ladies, lovers and friends, and then, negatively of false kings, tyrants, traitors, and of false loves. When in the eighteenth and nineteenth century, after Milton, poetic attention shifted from social to cosmic order, as in the odes of Thomson, Blake, Keats, and Whitman, the negative values were suggested in the fear of too powerful and ruthless a cosmos, as in Hardy's novels for example. It was the third great stage of our poetry, modern romanticism, that turned inward away from both social and natural orders into the positive world of memory and dream, the negative world of nightmare. The virtue of the angry and beat poets is that they have had the energy to spell out the negatives, the nightmare.

Public Poetry Coming

Once this search for individual identity has been conducted through the recesses of the four-letter body and the polysyllabic heart, at the demand not only of the esoteric few but also of the popular many, I think we shall be ready for a new stage, a fourth great stage of values for poetry which will come outward from the individual to the world he has made—not the vertical hierarchial social order of the Renaissance, but a more lateral geographic order of world concern. Already the poetic signs are pointing in this direction. The major poetic vocabulary today for the first time includes the terms of man's construction—what he had made—*street, house, wall, glass, window,* for example; and once poetry has begun to take responsibility for these artifacts, we can consider that man himself has accepted them as a major concern and a major value—both in their positive and constructive phases and in their negative destructive phases. Perhaps indeed it is only when men fully face the negative implications and dangers of what they value that the value becomes a reality for them. Now that the poets have begun to face the negatives as well as the positives of the romantic quest, I think we may begin to move away from this quest for personal identity which has so long absorbed us, and move out again into the world where our identities also flourish in their relation to others. Now that we have got Spoon River and Sauk Centre and The Hamlet and Winesburg, Ohio, I hope that the new great American novel may be about the Ugly American in all his splendor and complication.

So you see, I hope for a public poetry of the immediate future, following the private poetry of the immediate past. And when I suggest that the demand for it is already greater than the supply, I do not believe that this is merely wishful thinking. I believe that the half-formed hopes and values of people all over the world today are involved with moving from an old egocentric romanticism to a new order of mutuality—and that from platforms, screens, newspaper pages, as well as from the human heart, the increasing demand for these public values will increase the supply of poems which provide them.

The Importance of Tone in the Interpretation of Literature

LAURENCE PERRINE

When we speak of *tone* in connection with language, we refer to that element of an utterance which indicates the speaker's or writer's attitude toward his subject, his listener, or himself. In spoken language this feeling or attitude is indicated chiefly by tone of voice. The words "My dear Mary" may be so uttered as to suggest that the speaker is a patient-philosopher-explaining-the-obvious-to-an-idiot-child, or they may be made to express "I love you I love you I love you." In written language these emotional meanings must be expressed by a different means—by the words and images chosen, their arrangement, and their context. The words "My dear Mary" at the beginning of a letter will have their tone defined by what follows (by context), but if the letter begins "My darling Mary" or "Mary, my dear," the tone is more immediately established.

Obviously tone is an important part of meaning. It may even be the most important part of meaning. In communication with pet animals or babies, the tone of voice we use is far more important than the words we use. In interpreting literature the reader who understands the literal content of a poem but who mistakes its tone may be much further from understanding the poem than the reader who makes mistakes about its literal content but who understands the tone. Usually, misinterpretation of one leads to misinterpretation of the other, but understanding one without understanding the other is both hypothetically and actually possible.

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My purpose in this essay is to emphasize the importance of tone in interpretation, and to illustrate the techniques by which it is determined. I shall do so by examining three pairs of poems on similar subjects, in each of which one poem is fairly simple in tone, the other more complex.

The first pair consists of two unabashedly didactic poems, each of which draws an "example" from a butterfly:

THE EXAMPLE[1]

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W. H. Davies

TWO BUTTERFLIES WENT OUT AT NOON[2]

Two butterflies went out at noon
And waltzed upon a farm,
And then espied circumference
And caught a ride with him;

[1]From *The Collected Poems of W. H. Davies 1928* (New York: Jonathan Cape & Harrison Smith; London: Jonathan Cape, 1929), p. 118. With permission of Mrs. H. M. Davies and Jonathan Cape Limited.

[2]From *Bolts of Melody*, ed. by Mabel Loomis Todd and Millicent Todd Bingham (New York & London, Harper, 1945), p. 72. This poem was never finished by Miss Dickinson; the variants from which the editors chose are fully listed in *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*, ed. by Thomas H. Johnson (Cambridge, Mass., 1955), II, 410.

Then lost themselves and found themselves
In eddies of the sun
Till rapture missed her footing
And both were wrecked in noon.

To all surviving butterflies
Be this biography
Example, and monition
To entomology.

Emily Dickinson

The first poem is straightforward and direct in its approach both to its subject and to its reader. Its simplicity of language and of form support its meaning. The poem means what it says: Happiness comes from within; the happy heart can make its own joy out of a plain, hard life. The didactic purpose is not tacked on in a moral, but is announced in the first line and informs the whole poem. The candor of this purpose and the simplicity of the poem give it a quiet appeal, a naive charm. In the tone of the poem there are no complications.

In the second poem, however, there is a sharp shift of tone between the first two stanzas and the third. In the first two stanzas the language and the images are fanciful, extravagant, and delightful. The butterflies waltz, they catch a ride with circumference, they play hide and seek in the eddying streams of sunlight. They give themselves up to rapture, and they are "wrecked in noon." The tone of these stanzas is particularly set by such words as *waltzed*, *sun*, and *rapture*.

The third stanza draws the moral, and it does so in heavy, pretentiously pedantic language—*biography* for *life*, *monition* for *warning*, and *entomology* for *insects*. How seriously are we to take this "monition"? Is the poet in all earnestness advising us never to give ourselves up to ecstasy lest we come to grief? Or doesn't she rather make the experience described in the first two stanzas more attractive to us than the caution recommended in the third, even though the former does end in disaster? The clue is in the language. For the language of the third stanza is that of a person who has most certainly never waltzed. Its very over-solemnity tells us that the poet herself is not solemn: her long face and her grave tones slyly mock the advice that she is giving. To be sure, she is telling us that if we dance in the rain we may catch our deaths of pneumonia, that the person who gives up his heart completely to joy of any kind—love, for instance—may be "wrecked in noon." But her tone does not endorse the prudent pragmatism of the advice that she seems to be giving. Perhaps to be "wrecked in noon" is preferable to having never known the "eddies of the sun."

My second pair of poems are both written about the moon:

A SONNET OF THE MOON

Look how the pale Queen of the silent night
Doth cause the ocean to attend upon her,
And he, as long as she is in his sight,
With his full tide is ready her to honor;
But when the silver waggon of the Moon
Is mounted up so high he cannot follow,
The sea calls home his crystal waves to moan,
And with low ebb doth manifest his sorrow.

So you, that are the sovereign of my heart,
Have all my joys attending on your will,
My joys low-ebbing when you do depart,
When you return, their tide my heart doth fill.
So as you come and as you do depart,
Joys ebb and flow within my tender heart.

Charles Best

TARGET[8]

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(See footnote on p. 25 for its availability.)

R. P. Lister

These two poems differ widely in time of composition. The first, published soon after the death of Queen Elizabeth I, reflects in its imagery and thought the panoply of the Renaissance court with its numerous splendid attendants, its strong ethic of loyalty, and its centralization of power in the queen. The second, published during the reign of Elizabeth II, is a space-age poem, taking its occasion from the first missile-shots made at the moon. In subject also the two poems really differ: the first poem is about love, and uses the moon simply as metaphorical vehicle for paying tribute to the beloved. The second poem is about the moon and the moon-shots, and uses love to make a point in what it says about the moon. In tone the poems are even more sharply different. The first is straightforward and romantic: it treats the moon in its traditional role as an object of beauty and "queen" of the night-time sky and pays tribute to the beloved by comparing her to the moon in loveliness and power. The tone of the second is sardonic and more complex: we must not decide too quickly what the poem "says."

If we read it without heeding tone, this poem takes a hard-headed and utilitarian attitude. The moon, it says, is lifeless and almost useless, and shooting missiles at it will therefore do no harm. The moon does perform a slight service, to be sure, in that it makes it harder for burglars to commit thefts and for lovers to carry on clandestine affairs. But dogs serve the same purpose and will continue to do so; and the moon itself, though growing slightly pocked, will continue to glint on the halfcocked guns of the burglars. Moreover, none of the night's creatures—dogs, lovers, or burglars—will notice the pocking of the moon. They are all too absorbed in themselves.

The moon is depreciated in value and in romantic appeal throughout the poem. Though personified (referred to as "she" and given "arms" and a "face" or "visage"), the effect of this personification is countered by the fact that she "holds nothing in her arms," is "empty as a drum," is a "cipher," and is "dumb." The comparisons to drum and cipher indicate both roundness and emptiness. There is nothing like the full romantic personification of the moon in Best's poem as a Queen with her attendant court. Rather than being romantically "pale," or traditionally slim, slender, full, or refulgent, this moon is "suspended fatly" in the sky. Fatly, and, the context urges one to add, fatuously.

The value of love, with which the moon is traditionally associated, is also depreciated in the poem. Lovers are put in the same category as burglars. Like burglars, their affairs are stealthy and clandestine. Like burglars, they are dishonest, for, reclining "among the whispering bushes" they whisper romantic lies to each other. Almost the only usefulness the moon has is that it makes their concealment more difficult. And the usefulness of dogs is that they bark both at lovers ("when cottage doors are lightly knocked") and at burglars.

But before drawing conclusions, we

[5]From *The New Yorker,* November 28, 1959, p. 180.

should notice that the poet's attitude towards lovers is after all ambiguous. This ambiguity is partly expressed in the word *lie*. The first and most obvious meaning of the word is *recline*. But here the word is torn from its natural sentence order and placed at the end of its clause. It is also at the end of a line, and, without finishing a sentence, is at the end of a stanza. It bears the additional weight of rhyme. By this combination of rhetorical devices the poet has forced a peculiar emphasis on the word, which makes us consider it more closely, and which finally makes us read it also in the sense of *deceive*. If it is taken in its first sense only, however, these lines say nothing unfavorable to the lovers; and, in fact, despite their juxtaposition to burglars, the lovers are treated rather favorably than otherwise. The connotations of "soft embrace" and "whispering bushes" are favorable and predispose us to take a traditionally romantic attitude toward them. Moreover, lovers are people (and produce more people), and thus the lovers in their "soft embrace" are in contrast to the moon, who "holds nothing in her arms" and is uninhabited.

But the moon, too, is treated ambiguously. True, she is empty and a cipher, people-less and useless; nevertheless, she "charms" and is "delectable." Moreover, the whole second stanza is subtly ambiguous in its attitude toward the moon.

> She does not help the human race.
> Surely, she shines when bats flit by
> And burglars seek their burgling-place
> And lovers in a soft embrace
> Among the whispering bushes lie—

These lines can be read either as meaning that she does after all help the human race by helping to expose burglars and lovers, as we have read them above; or they can be read to mean that she does after all help *part* of the human race, namely, burglars and lovers. She helps the burglars find their burgling-place, and she helps lovers, as the moon has always helped lovers, by furnishing romantic setting and inspiration. The poet has it both ways. And in the second of these ways, if we accept a favorable attitude toward lovers, the moon does a desirable job.

And, in fact, we must finally accept favorable attitude toward both lovers and moon. For the missiles are "marauding" and they leave the moon "pocked": our attitude toward neither marauders nor pock-marks is favorable. Thus the poet, though he pretends to be matter-of-fact and utilitarian and not-to-be-taken-in by romantic illusions about moonlight and love, is, in fact, like Best, the champion of moonlight and love and all that is "delectable" and beautiful. And the tone of the poem, though on the surface cynical, hard-headed, and utilitarian, when read more deeply reveals an ironic protest against the desecration of the moon.

My third pair of poems are both by one poet, Walter Savage Landor, and both are on the subject of old age. A period of seven years separates them in publication, but both were written when Landor was over seventy.

TO AGE

> Welcome, old friend! These many years
> Have we lived door by door;
> The Fates have laid aside their shears
> Perhaps for some few more.
>
> I was indocile at an age
> When better boys were taught,
> But thou at length hast made me sage,
> If I am sage in aught.
>
> Little I know from other men,
> Too little they from me,
> But thou hast pointed well the pen
> That writes these lines to thee.
>
> Thanks for expelling Fear and Hope,
> One vile, the other vain;
> One's scourge, the other's telescope,
> I shall not see again.
>
> Rather what lies before my feet
> My notice shall engage—
> He who hath braved Youth's dizzy heat
> Dreads not the frost of Age.

YES; I WRITE VERSES

Yes; I write verses now and then,
But blunt and flaccid is my pen,
No longer talked of by young men
  As rather clever;
In the last quarter are my eyes,
You see it by their form and size;
Is it not time then to be wise?
  Or now or never.

Fairest that ever sprang from Eve!
While Time allows the short reprieve,
Just look at me! would you believe
  'Twas once a lover?
I cannot clear the five-bar gate,
But, trying first its timbers' state,
Climb stiffly up, take breath, and wait
  To trundle over.

Through gallopade I cannot swing
The entangling blooms of Beauty's
  spring;
  Be't true or false,
And am beginning to opine
Those girls are only half-divine
Whose waists yon wicked boys entwine
  In giddy waltz.

I fear that arm above that shoulder,
I wish them wiser, graver, older,
Sedater, and no harm if colder,
  And panting less.
Ah! people were not half so wild
In former days, when, starchly mild,
Upon her high-heeled Essex smiled
  The brave Queen Bess.

How are we to explain the difference in these two poems, both written by the same poet? In one he welcomes old age and says that it has brought him wisdom and sharpened his pen. In the other he laments old age and says that it has diminished his powers and blunted his pen. Are we to conclude that Landor's attitude sharply changed in the seven years that separated the two poems? This theory would be attractive except that actually the first of the two, as printed above, was the later written, so we cannot explain the change on the supposition of physical and mental decline. Are we to assume then that Landor felt different ways about old age on different days and wrote one poem out of one mood and the other out of a different? Nothing could be more natural or more consistent with the inconsistent facts of human nature. But before we settle on this conclusion, we had best again examine the tone of the two poems.

Again the first of the two poems is the simpler. There is pride in its tone, and also humility; there is gratitude and determination and stoicism. But on the whole the tone is forthright and uncomplicated. It is the second poem which demands close inspection.

First, the situation. The speaker (since he is a poet and was once a lover, we may not unfairly identify him with Landor) is at a ball watching the young people waltz. (The waltz, which had been introduced into England only in 1815, was regarded by some of the older generation as a daring and improper dance.) A young lady has come courteously up to the old gentleman and has asked him, "Aren't you Mr. Landor the poet?" or "Don't you write poetry?" or some such. The poem is Landor's reply.

The reply might at first seem the typical querulous grumbling of self-pitying old age. The poet complains of his failing eyesight and his stiffening limbs: he can no longer vault the five-bar gate or join in a sprightly dance. He complains also of mental decline: he can no longer write clever verses, as he once did, or speak the gallant and tender speech—"Be't true or false"—to the opposite sex. Finally, in the characteristic posture of old age, he laments the wildness of the younger generation and expresses a longing for the "good old days" when things were statelier and more fitting than they are today.

But are we to take all this at face value? May not Landor be "playing a game" with the young lady by pretending—or half-pretending (for he doesn't really mean to fool her)—to be the crumbling old monument that she perhaps expected to find? Will she go away from this conversation merely with a

sense of having done her duty by making the conscientious inquiry, or will she go away delighted at having discovered a gallant and charming old man? All depends upon his tone; and since we are not there like the young lady to hear the humor in his voice, or to observe the twinkle in his eye, we must *infer* these from his language.

Some people are able to triumph over their pains and misfortunes by converting them into the materials of humor. They steal the sting from their miseries by making them into a comic saga. Of course, no man but regrets the dimming of his eyesight and the stiffening of his limbs, and there is a genuine wistfulness in Landor's references to his physical decline. Nevertheless, the striking thing about his account of his infirmities is the imaginative humor with which he describes them. Thus, he draws his metaphor for his dimming eyesight from the phases of the moon: "In the last quarter are my eyes." The wit of the comparison undercuts the complaint. Then, turning to the young lady he commands her:

> Just look at me! would you believe
> 'Twas once a lover?

It was once a lover! A suppressed chuckle buoys up his use of the neuter pronoun. And Landor's complaint about his inability to vault the five-bar gate is elaborated into a lovingly-detailed humorous description of his present procedure: First he grasps the bars and shakes them, testing their firmness. Next he climbs stiffly up, pauses at the top to regain his breath and gather strength, then "trundles" over. In the two comma-marked pauses which interrupt and slow down the penultimate line of the description, one almost hears the aged poet puffing for breath. Clearly, here is a man who can laugh at himself. He finds as much humor in the spectacle he presents as might the most detached stander-by.

As for the other infirmities, they are nonexistent. We cannot take seriously his complaint that he "cannot say the tender thing, Be't true or false," when he has just addressed the young lady at his side as "Fairest that ever sprang from Eve!" In fact, we wonder whether, protected by the privilege of age, he may not now flatter the opposite sex even more boldly than when he was younger. At any rate, he has lost none of his gallantry with increasing years and can speak of young ladies as "The entangling blooms of Beauty's spring" as gracefully and as appreciatively as any youthful poet.

Similarly the complaint that his pen is "blunt and flaccid" wilts before the evidence of the completed poem, which is as "clever," as delicious, as neatly put together as anything that Landor composed when younger. The old man still writes well, and knows it.

Once we have established the essential playfulness of Landor's tone, we should be prepared to take at less than face value his remarks about the younger generation and the "good old days" of brave Queen Bess. If indeed the young people go at a pretty fast pace for an old man, and if the poet surprises in himself a half-wish that they would slow down a bit and that the girls would "pant less," he recognizes this wish for what it is and ridicules it by exaggerating it. Rather than being really distressed by the "wickedness" of the boys in putting their arms around the girls' waists publicly, he probably wishes that he might do the same. And if he no longer thinks the girls "divine," he amazingly still thinks of them as "half-divine"—an illusion lost by most men long before they have reached the poet's age of over seventy.

But indeed the old man seems to have held on to a youthful spirit remarkably long:

> Is it not time then to be wise?
> Or now or never.

The spectacle of a seventy-year-old man resolving to be no longer young and

foolish may well excite our admiration, even though (in view of the following line) we may question whether he is fully ready to give up romantic indiscretions even yet. At any rate, let no man lament for Walter Savage Landor or accuse him lightly of self-pity. There's life in the old boy yet!

We have examined three pairs of poems, in each of which the first poem seemed to exhibit a positive attitude towards its subject—the lives of butterflies, the moon and love, old age—and the second poem a negative attitude. On closer examination, however, these differences dissolved, and we found the second poem in the pair also to manifest approval of its subject, though perhaps a more qualified approval than in the first. When a statement means the opposite of what it says, we call it ironical; we must therefore say that the second poem in each of these pairs is ironical. Only in the simplest forms of irony, however, is the meaning confined to the opposite of what is said ("Aren't you a pretty sight!" addressed to the boy who has just fallen into a mud hole). In more complex forms of irony two things are meant at once: both what is said, and the opposite of what is said, though usually there is a stronger emphasis on one side than the other. Thus Emily Dickinson, if she values rapture over caution, is yet keenly aware of the price that must be paid for it. R. P. Lister, though he approves of both the moon and love, is well aware of the lies romantic lovers tell each other and of the deceptions they perpetrate. And Walter Savage Landor, though he can enjoy his old age, is fully cognizant of its aches and pains and its gradually slackening pace. Moreover, though these three poems are ironical, their irony is not to be located in any specific words or lines; rather it is an irony of the whole, an irony of *tone*. When Landor declares that "blunt and flaccid" is his pen, the words do not strike us with ironic force; it is only later, when we have read the whole, that we realize how they must be qualified. We are brought back, then, to tone as a determining element of meaning. It is tone which tells us what the author feels about his subject, his audience, and himself. But tone is located in no specific element of the poem; it arises from diction, images, figures of speech, structure, even rhymes and meter—in short, from the whole. If we miss any part of this whole, we may miss the tone of the poem. And if we miss its tone, we miss its meaning.